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## Preserving Languages Is About More Than Words

By Kari Lydersen

Washington Post Staff Writer  
Monday, March 16, 2009

The traditional Irish language is everywhere this time of year, emblazoned on green T-shirts and echoing through pubs. But Irish, often called Gaelic in the United States, is one of thousands of "endangered languages" worldwide. Though it is Ireland's official tongue, there are only about 30,000 fluent speakers left, down from 250,000 when the country was founded in 1922.

Irish schools teach the language as a core subject, but outside a few enclaves in western Ireland, it is relatively rare for families to speak it at home.

"There's the gap between being able to speak Irish and actually speaking it on a daily basis," said Brian O'Conchubhair, an assistant professor of Irish studies at the University of Notre Dame who grew up learning Irish in school. "It's very hard to find it in the cities; it's like a hidden culture."

Irish is expected to survive at least through this century, but half of the world's almost 7,000 remaining languages may disappear by 2100, experts say.

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A language is considered extinct when the last person who learned it as his or her primary tongue dies. Last month, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched an online atlas of endangered languages, labeling more than 2,400 at risk of extinction.

Hot spots where languages are most endangered include Siberia, northern Australia, the North American Pacific Northwest, and parts of the Andes and Amazon, according to the Living Tongues

Institute for Endangered Languages, a nonprofit partnering with National Geographic to record and promote disappearing tongues.

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Language extinction has been a phenomenon for at least 10,000 years, since the dawn of agriculture.

"In the pre-agricultural state, the norm was to have lots and lots of little languages," said Gregory D.S. Anderson, director of the Living Tongues Institute. "As humans developed with agriculture, larger population groups were able to aggregate together, and you got larger languages developing."

Languages typically die when speakers of a small language group come in contact with a more dominant population. That happened first when hunter-gatherers transitioned to agriculture, then during periods of European colonial expansion, and more recently with global migration and urbanization. The spread of English, Spanish and Russian wiped out many small languages.

"As long as people feel embarrassed, restrained or openly criticized for using a particular language, it's only natural for them to want to avoid continuing to do what's causing a negative response, whether it's something overt like having your mouth washed out or more subtle like discrimination," Anderson said.

Russian-language-only policies have virtually extinguished many Siberian languages, including Tofa, which lets speakers use a single word to say "a two-year-old male, un-castrated, ridable reindeer."

In the United States and Australia in past decades, the government forced native peoples to abandon their languages through vehicles such as boarding schools that punished youth for speaking a traditional tongue. Many Native American and aboriginal Australian languages never recovered. The United States has lost 115 languages in the past 500 years, by UNESCO's count, 53 of them since the 1950s. Last year, the Alaskan language Eyak disappeared with the death of the last speaker.

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